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Pattern of conferences

Pattern of Conferences

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. Introduction

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/65/122). The Advisory Committee also had before it the draft report of the Committee on Conferences for 2010,* which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences. During its consideration of the report, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification.

2. The report of the Secretary-General, which was submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 64/230 and 64/243, addresses a variety of conference management issues, namely, meetings management, implementation of integrated global management, documents management, and matters relating to interpretation and translation. The report also puts forward suggestions as to further steps that could be taken to ensure the optimal functioning of the management of conferences and meetings at the United Nations.

II. Meetings management

Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

3. In annex V to his report, the Secretary-General provides statistical data on the provision of conference services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States in 2009 (table 1), as well as a comparative analysis of the provision of services for those groups from 2007 to 2009 (table 2). The Secretary-

* The final version of the report of the Committee on Conferences will be issued as document A/65/32.

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General indicates in paragraph 15 of his report that, in 2009, 79 per cent of the total number of requests for meetings with interpretation services were met, as compared with 77 per cent in 2008. He goes on to state that in New York, as a result of improved planning, 87 per cent of requests made in 2009 were met, as compared with 83 per cent in 2008.

4. The Advisory Committee notes from table 1 of annex V that, in 2009, no requests for meetings with interpretation services were met, or indeed made, in either Vienna or Nairobi. This phenomenon is explained in annex VI to the report, where it is noted that, since the United Nations Office at Vienna has only one team of interpreters, it cannot provide interpretation for meetings of regional groups. At the United Nations Office at Nairobi, regional and other major groupings of Member States did not request such services in 2009 (see A/65/122, annex VI, footnotes b and c). While the report of the Secretary-General indicates that the Office at Nairobi does have the capacity to provide the regional and other major groupings of Member States with interpretation services, it was explained to the Advisory Committee, upon enquiry, that such capacity was available only when there were no mandated calendar meetings. Accordingly, no requests for services had been made in 2009 because the concerned groups were aware that all available capacity was being used for mandated meetings.

Capital master plan

5. In paragraphs 20 to 24 of his report, the Secretary-General describes the impact of the ongoing implementation of the first phase of the capital master plan on meetings held at Headquarters. Start-up delays in the North Lawn Building, as well as reduced seating capacity in the full membership conference rooms in that Building, have had an impact on the operations of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, as has the relocation of all conference-servicing staff to eight separate swing spaces. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that efforts were under way to resolve all outstanding issues and that any additional costs incurred as a result of those efforts would be reported to the General Assembly at the appropriate time. **The Advisory Committee re-emphasizes the need to take all necessary measures to ensure the full and uninterrupted provision of quality services throughout the period of implementation of the capital master plan.**

III. Integrated global management

6. In paragraphs 25 and 26 of his report, the Secretary-General gives a brief overview of the tangible results achieved as a result of the integrated global management of conference services. These include the launch of the data warehouse; the introduction in Vienna of a state-of-the-art meetings management system (parallel testing of this system is under way in New York with a view to its full introduction before the end of 2010); the full implementation across all four duty stations of the interpreters' assignment programme; and the establishment of a "proximity rule" for the servicing of meetings held away from the four duty stations, pursuant to which the costs of using staff from different duty stations would be compared and the least costly arrangement assembled, taking into consideration replacement costs, available capacity and quality assurance.

7. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that while financial gains had not ever been the primary objective of integrated global management, some efficiencies had been realized. For example, between 2006 and 2009, the global workload for translation had increased by more than 20 per cent without any corresponding increase in resources. Implementation of the proximity rule (see para. 6 above) had resulted in savings on airfare and in the near elimination of the practice of sending documents and other materials by pouch to venues away from the four main duty stations. In addition, the recruitment of non-local freelance translators and editors was being kept to a minimum, and the use of non-local freelance précis writers had been discontinued.

8. The Advisory Committee notes, however, that in paragraph 27 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that progress in the implementation of integrated global management, while significant, has remained slow. He attributes this situation to the fact that, to date, integrated global management has been premised on a fully voluntary and collaborative approach, which implies that advances can be made only if all the parties concerned, namely the four duty stations, are in full agreement. According to the Secretary-General, it is difficult to adopt a more robust approach to integrated global management because the conference management units at the various duty stations do not report to the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, but rather to their respective Directors-General.

9. In this connection, and in response to the findings of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (see A/64/166), the Department has concluded, inter alia, that since the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management is accountable for all expenditure under section 2 of the regular budget, he should also be able to exercise the corresponding authority in the management and disbursement of resources, both human and financial. In paragraph 28 (c) of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the full implementation of integrated global management and the ensuing gains in efficiency and cost-effectiveness can be achieved only if the organizational structure and hierarchical reporting lines within the Department are revised in order to afford the Under-Secretary-General the authority required to fulfil General Assembly mandates. **The Advisory Committee shares the Secretary-General's view, and points out that it has already, on two previous occasions, emphasized the importance that should be attached to the authority and accountability of the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management in the effective management of all the resources in section 2 of the budget (see A/62/7, para. I.18, and A/64/7, para. I.43).** In this connection, the Secretary-General proposes that the General Assembly request him to review the current structure of conference management across the four duty stations and submit proposals at the sixty-sixth session that could lead to enhanced efficiency and accountability. **The Advisory Committee concurs with the approach proposed by the Secretary-General.**

10. As far as performance measurement is concerned, annex VI to the Secretary-General's report contains the performance matrix for 2009, which provides indicators relating to human resources, meetings management and timeliness of documentation, as well as productivity measures for the language services. **The Advisory Committee considers that emphasis on the quality of the language services provided to Member States does not preclude a concurrent emphasis on the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of those services. In this regard, while**

the performance matrix contains some useful information, the Advisory Committee is of the view that the statistical data contained in annex VI should have been accompanied by a quantitative analysis focusing on the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the Department's operations.

11. On a related matter, the Advisory Committee recalls that, in its previous report on the pattern of conferences, it had noted that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had already developed a costing model and tools to quantify conference-servicing costs. At that time, the Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the Department intended to refine the model, which had last been updated in 2003, and to update the underlying unit costs for outputs and services (see A/64/484, para. 7). In this connection, the Committee notes from paragraph 29 of the Secretary-General's report that, in line with a recommendation made by OIOS (see A/64/166, recommendation 3), a comprehensive update of the costing methodology for conference services is under way, in close consultation with the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts.

IV. Matters related to documentation and publication

12. The Advisory Committee notes from paragraph 35 of the Secretary-General's report that, during the reporting period, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management made tangible progress in increasing the timely submission of documents in New York in accordance with the mandated time frames: during the first six months of 2010, the overall rate of compliance with submission guidelines for slotted pre-session documents reached 78 per cent, up from 71 per cent in 2008 and 75 per cent in 2009. For the same period, the overall rate of compliance with issuance time frames for slotted documents increased to 77 per cent, as compared with 72 per cent in 2008 and 73 per cent in 2009.

13. The Advisory Committee notes further that, during the reporting period, the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Nairobi began to implement slotting systems (such systems are already in place at both Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Vienna). In addition, following an analysis undertaken by the Department in cooperation with the Department of Political Affairs, a pilot project for the slotting of some Security Council reports was launched in May 2010. **The Advisory Committee welcomes these developments, as well as the Department's intention to establish a global dynamic slotting system, which it trusts will lead to improved capacity planning.**

14. In paragraph 37 of his report, the Secretary-General describes the efforts undertaken by the Department to respond to the General Assembly's concerns about the perennial difficulties associated with the late submission of documents for the Fifth Committee (see resolution 64/230). In addition, annex II to the report contains a table setting out the conference-servicing implications of proposals to adjust the 2011 calendar of conferences and meetings to address the problem of the timely availability of documentation for the Fifth Committee. The Advisory Committee notes that, while the rate of compliance with issuance time frames has improved (84 per cent for the first six months of 2010, as compared with 81 per cent in 2009), the Secretary-General is of the view that further progress during the second resumed session of the Fifth Committee will depend largely on increased timeliness of submission of the reports of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. In

this connection, the Advisory Committee wishes to point out that its own compliance with submission guidelines is contingent on both the programme of work of the Fifth Committee and the timely receipt of reports and other documentation originating elsewhere in the Secretariat.

15. **The Advisory Committee reaffirms that the timely submission of documentation is key to the effective implementation of the mandate of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and therefore urges the Secretary-General to ensure that all author departments comply with submission deadlines.**

16. In its previous report on the pattern of conferences, the Advisory Committee expressed concern about the additional burden placed on the Division of Conference Services in Geneva as a result of the continuing development of the activities of the Human Rights Council (see A/64/484, paras. 16-19). During its consideration of the Secretary-General's current report, the Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the palliative measures taken by the Department, namely the transfer of additional human and financial resources to the Division and the adoption of pragmatic management solutions, such as the workload-sharing referred to in paragraph 42 of the Secretary-General's report, had had the desired effect, making it possible for the Department to process the additional workload. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the steps taken by the Department and expects that, as the integrated global management approach is further refined (see sect. III above), workload-sharing such as that described in paragraph 42 of the Secretary-General's report will, where appropriate, be employed proactively in order to prevent backlogs.**

17. The Advisory Committee recalls that the Department attributed its inability to process all the Human Rights Council documentation submitted to it in 2009 partly to the fact that some of the outcome documents of the Council's universal periodic review process far exceeded the allowable length (see A/64/484, paras. 16-17). Subsequently, in its report on the audit of conference services put at the disposal of the Human Rights Council in 2009, OIOS recommended that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management prepare a document for consideration by the General Assembly consolidating existing guidelines on word and page limits and clarifying the number of words per page and pages per document for reports (see A/64/511, recommendation 4).

18. The paper prepared by the Department in response to that recommendation is contained in annex VIII to the Secretary-General's report on the pattern of conferences. Paragraph 4 of the paper sets out the legislative framework for the current system of page limits for parliamentary documents (a maximum of 16 pages for documents originating in the Secretariat (General Assembly resolution 52/214), 32 pages for reports of subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly (resolution 51/211 B) and a desirable limit of 32 pages for reports of intergovernmental bodies, ideally to be reduced to 20 pages over a period of time (resolution 52/214)). Paragraph 5 explains that, where the General Assembly refers in its resolutions to "pages" in the context of the control and limitation of documents, the Secretariat has interpreted those references to mean printed pages containing approximately 530 words each. Accordingly, and taking into account required reformatting adjustments, the Department has, for planning purposes, calculated that the word count equivalent of 16 pages is 8,500 words and the equivalent of 20 pages is 10,700 words. The Advisory Committee notes, in this regard, that the references to word

count refer to words in English, since the majority of parliamentary documentation submitted for processing is drafted in English. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that the Department had devised a formula for calculating equivalent word counts in the other five official languages.

19. In paragraph 45 of his report, the Secretary-General invites the General Assembly to confirm the shift to measuring the length of documents by their word count rather than by their number of pages. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that a smaller unit of measurement (words rather than pages) was more precise and would allow the Department to more accurately predict, and therefore better manage, its workload. It was also explained to the Committee that a positive decision of the General Assembly on this issue would serve to codify existing practice rather than to institute new limits. **The Advisory Committee has no objection to the General Assembly confirming the shift to measuring the length of documents by word count rather than page count, without prejudice to any of the six official languages of the United Nations.**

20. In paragraph 47 of his report, the Secretary-General invites the Assembly to endorse the maximum length of 10,700 words for intergovernmental reports, on the understanding that waivers will be granted on a case-by-case basis so as not to affect adversely either the quality of the presentation or the content of the reports. **On this issue, the Advisory Committee emphasizes that limits and guidelines on the length of intergovernmental reports must be applied in a reasonable manner in order to ensure optimal quality and content.**

V. Matters related to translation and interpretation

Succession planning

21. Paragraphs 49 and 50 of the Secretary-General's report describe the ongoing demographic transition affecting the Department and the measures taken and envisaged to address it. The Secretary-General indicates, inter alia, that total turnover for interpreters and translators for the period 2010-2016 will reach 43 and 40 per cent, respectively, as compared with an average of 13 per cent of staff members holding fixed-term, permanent and continuing appointments across the whole of the Secretariat. In absolute numbers, this means that competitive examinations will have to produce 119 new recruits for interpretation and 217 for translation during the period in question.

22. The Advisory Committee notes that the Department has put in place a proactive succession planning programme, consisting of the following two components:

(a) Outreach to universities, designed to raise public awareness of career opportunities at the United Nations and qualification requirements with a view to enlarging the global pool of qualified conference interpreters and translators. To date, 14 memorandums of understanding have been signed with leading universities, and three more are expected to be signed in 2010;

(b) Streamlining the competitive examination process for language staff in order to take advantage of new technologies and modalities. In paragraph 66 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that the current examination process is both lengthy and costly. The establishment of a roster of successful candidates takes 7 to 18 months, with recruitment taking another 6 to 12 months. The cost of the

examination per tested candidate ranges from $720 to $4,854, as compared with $435 to $1,273 for the national competitive recruitment examination, and the number of successful candidates remains insufficient to meet demand. From 2005 to 2009, only 57 per cent of the total number of applicants were convoked to written examinations, and only 7 per cent of those examined were rostered. The Advisory Committee notes that the recommendations of a consultant engaged to suggest specific solutions to this problem are currently being discussed. **Information on any concrete action taken in response to those recommendations should be included in the Secretary-General's next report on the pattern of conferences.**

Possibility of raising or waiving the mandatory age of separation for language staff

23. As indicated in paragraph 65 of the Secretary-General's report, the Department takes the view that flexibility in applying the mandatory age of separation for language staff (currently 60 years for those staff members appointed before 1 January 1990 and 62 for all others) would ease the demographic transition currently taking place. By giving language staff the option to work until the age of 62 or 65, departures could be staggered over a greater period of time, thereby preventing the large exodus of staff that is currently anticipated. In paragraph 69 of the Secretary-General's report, the Department therefore invites the General Assembly to consider endorsing its proposal to raise or waive the mandatory age of separation for language staff.

24. **The Advisory Committee is of the view that raising or waiving the mandatory age of separation of staff is a human resources policy question and, as such, should not be addressed in the present context.** In this connection, the Advisory Committee recalls that, in an earlier report on human resources management, it invited the Secretary-General and the International Civil Service Commission to explore the possibility of changing the mandatory age of separation, taking into account such issues as the rejuvenation of the Secretariat, vacancy rates and the actuarial implications of that course of action for the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund (see A/63/526, para. 78). In its annual report for 2009, the Commission indicates that it has requested its secretariat, in cooperation with the organizations of the common system and the Pension Fund, to prepare a comprehensive report on the possibility of changing the mandatory age of separation and that it will revert to the issue at its seventy-second session (see A/64/30, chap. III, para. 20).

25. The Advisory Committee recalls that, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 57/305, retired United Nations language staff who are in receipt of a pension from the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund are allowed to work for up to 125 workdays per calendar year. **The Committee considers that, as a temporary measure and pending the development of a more long-term solution to the demographic transition, the General Assembly may wish to request the Secretary-General to explore the possibility of raising the 125-day threshold in order to boost capacity in the language services. Any proposal to that end should include an explanation of the financial and/or administrative implications and should be presented to the General Assembly at the appropriate time.**

Quality control of contractual translation

26. Paragraphs 51 to 58 of the Secretary-General's report describe the progress made by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in

increasing the use of contractual translation with a view to improving efficiency and cost-effectiveness at all four conference-servicing duty stations. The Advisory Committee notes that, according to the Secretary-General, the initial results obtained for 2009 and 2010 at the United Nations Office at Vienna, where the proportion of translation work done contractually has increased from 27 per cent in 2009 to 30 per cent as at 30 June 2010, support the original concept of increased outsourcing with powerful in-house quality control.

27. The Advisory Committee also notes, however, that experience gained to date has shown that around 20 to 40 per cent of the externally processed workload needs additional revision, although the Secretary-General does indicate, in paragraph 53 of his report, that most of the unsatisfactory contractual translations done during the period under review were traced to a very small number of individual translators and to a particular institutional vendor, and that the poor results could be attributed to the assignment of translations to contractors who are not fully familiar with the subject matter. **The Advisory Committee emphasizes that any savings and/or efficiencies arising from the increased use of contractual translation must not come at the expense of quality. The Committee is supportive of the Department's efforts to improve cost-effectiveness by expanding the use of this mode of delivery, but stresses that, in order to assure quality and to prevent duplication of efforts, those contractors whose work systematically fails to meet the required standards should be removed from the common roster. On a related matter, the Committee reiterates its previous recommendation concerning the need to provide remote access to specialized United Nations terminology and reference resources (such as UNTERM, DTSearch and other documentation databases) to all translators working off-site, since this should enhance the accuracy of their work and reduce the time spent on in-house revision and quality control (see A/64/7, para. I.83).**

28. The Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications intended to prepare a report on the use of contractual translation by the United Nations and other international organizations. Where relevant, the information contained in the report should be shared with the General Assembly in the context of the next report on the pattern of conferences.

29. In paragraph 60 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that, from the experience gained thus far, the Department has concluded that quality control should be performed by senior revisers at the P-5 level. The Advisory Committee notes that revision has historically been performed by staff members at both the P-4 and P-5 levels. **The Committee therefore recommends that a more complete explanation of the Department's finding be provided in the context of the budget proposed by the Secretary-General for section 2 for the biennium 2012-2013.**

Use of freelance interpreters

30. In section V, paragraph 11 of its resolution 64/230, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report on the impact of freelance recruitment on the quality of interpretation at all duty stations. In paragraph 61 of his report on the pattern of conferences, the Secretary-General responded to that request, indicating that, while the quality of freelance interpreters has generally been adequate, there are several challenges associated with their use, namely, availability at short notice, fierce global competition for their services, and the fact that the conditions of their temporary employment at the United Nations are not as competitive as those offered

by other institutions that employ freelancers. **A status report on the measures taken to address those challenges should be provided by the Secretary-General in his next report on the pattern of conferences.**

Specific challenges faced by the United Nations Office at Nairobi

31. Paragraphs 70 to 75 of the Secretary-General's report address the specific staffing challenges faced by the United Nations Office at Nairobi. In particular, the Secretary-General indicates that, while there has been a significant increase in workload following the renovation of the conference rooms at the Office, vacancy rates remain as high as they were at the end of 2009.

32. In order to strengthen the capacity of the Office to attract and retain high-quality interpreters and translators, as well as to ensure appropriate quality control for the 40 per cent of the translation workload that is contracted out, the Department is inviting the General Assembly to endorse its proposal to upgrade the level of six interpreter and six Senior Reviser posts from the P-4 to the P-5 level. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, during recent bienniums, the Department had focused on converting Professional posts in Nairobi that were funded from extrabudgetary resources to established regular budget posts, with a view to providing a more stable working environment and facilitating the retention of staff. Now that all the conversions have been completed, the Department considered that it was time to bring the Senior Reviser posts in the Documentation Service, as well as the Chief of Booth posts for all six languages in the Interpretation Service, up to the same grade level (i.e., P-5) as at the other three duty stations, in line with the principle of equal pay for equal work and in order to promote mobility across all four duty stations. It was also clarified to the Advisory Committee, upon enquiry, that paragraph 75 of the Secretary-General's report was not designed to be a request for immediate resources but rather to signal the Department's intent to propose the upward reclassification of the 12 posts in its proposed budget for 2012-2013. **The Advisory Committee notes the Department's intent and will take any action it deems appropriate when a formal proposal is submitted.**